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# Managerial Communication Practices in Chinese Factories: A Preliminary Investigation

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## Abstract

This paper presents the results of a preliminary study of selected managerial communication practices in Chinese factories. Members of a delegation of Chinese managers visiting the United States were interviewed to explore: (a) the extent to which Chinese factories conform to a bureaucratic model of organization, and (b) factory director communication within these organization. Of particular interest were their upward and downward communication practices, and their methods for persuading and motivating workers and managing conflicts with problem employees. The results of our investigation reveal a distinctive form of bureaucracy operating within these factories. Moreover, we describe patterns of managerial communication practices that can be traced to cultural context, Chinese ideology, and organizational structure of the state-owned factory in mainland China.

As organizations become more internationalized, cross-cultural and intercultural communication becomes increasingly relevant to organizational members and researchers (Stohl, 1990). Currently, organizational and managerial communication research within Asian cultures focuses almost exclusively on the Japanese (e.g., Barnlund, 1989; Hirokawa & Miyahara, 1986; Stewart, Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, & Nishida, 1986). Management communication in mainland China, the world's most populous country and arguably the most bureaucratic one, has yet to emerge as a sustained focus of study.

This is particularly ironic given the early evolution and importance of bureaucracy in traditional China for China has been described as "permanently Bureaucratic" (Balazs, 1964). For centuries the best minds of the culture meditated on the problems of communication within the governmental hierarchy and between the people and the bureaucracy. As early as the fourth century B.C.E. Chinese political theorists were advising rulers to ensure that information flowed smoothly upward and downward, to minimize bias and falsification in sources, and to guard against the influence of cliques and opportunists. For example:

In listening to reports and proposals, if you are too stern and severe and have no patience in guiding and drawing others out, then your subordinates will be fearful and distant and will withdraw into themselves and be unwilling to speak. In such a case, important matters are likely to be left unattended and minor matters to be botched. If, however, you are too sympathetic and understanding, too fond of leading and drawing others out, and have no sense of where to stop, then men will come with all sorts of perverse suggestions and you will be flooded with dubious proposals. In such a case you will find yourself with too much to listen to and too much to do, and this also will be inimical to good government. (Hsun Tzu, c.260/1963, pp. 34–35)

The immense, complex bureaucracy of China was one of the prime sources for Weber's groundbreaking analysis of bureaucracy. Weber described bureaucracy as a form of social organization designed to maximize organizational efficiency and implement the principle of universalism. Through structures and processes such as task specialization, hierarchical authority, the development and maintenance of impersonal work relationships and the use of formal rules to guide and ensure rational action, bureaucracy in its ideal form lends predictability and efficiency to organizational behavior (Clegg, 1990). The extent to which this model applies to contemporary Chinese organizations of all stripes and the ways in which it shapes the resulting communication practices are questions worthy of additional study.

Existing literature related to managerial communication in China falls into several categories. One body of literature focuses on the intercultural business encounter. These publications include recommendations for how to conduct oneself in business dealings with the Chinese (e.g., Chu, 1988; deKeijzer, 1986; Wall, 1990). A second type of literature focuses on the content and process of business communication instruction in mainland China (Zong & Hildebrandt, 1983; Halpern, 1983). A third type of related literature concerns communication between factory managers and higher levels of the state system. With few exceptions (e.g., Hildebrandt, 1988), this research has been conducted by economists and political scientists whose primary interest is not in communication processes.

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on work-related communication in China by investigating internal, managerial communication practices in Chinese factories. Two overarching research questions guided our study: (a) to what extent do Chinese manufacturing organizations conform to a bureaucratic model of organization; and, (b) how does conformity to or divergence from this model relate to

managers' communication practices with their employees? We were most interested in structures and processes related to vertical communication, persuading and motivating workers, and managing conflict with problem employees.

### **Cultural Context**

Managerial communication both affects and is affected by the larger cultural milieu. This section briefly discusses group-centeredness, Confucianism, Chinese Communism, and the relationship between family and work life in Chinese society. Then we briefly discuss the state-owned Chinese factory and the factory director responsibility system.

#### ***Group-Centered Culture***

Traditional China was group-oriented, with the primary ties being those of kinship and close personal relations. The individual existed for the benefit of the group, group pressure was applied to ensure conformity through eliciting shame, and conflict was handled through intragroup mediation rather than an external legal system. This society was also characterized by paternalism, especially in the extended families. The elder males provided for the welfare of the group including such services as educating family members, arranging marriages, and determining members' occupations. The contemporary Chinese remain a highly group-oriented people (Hofstede, 1986). Individuals derive their identity from groups and are expected to adopt group goals and opinions in exchange for protection and care. Socialization into Chinese culture fosters a strong sense of group identity so that individual achievement is presumed to be the result of group efforts and a source of group honor. Similarly, individual misconduct is a source of group shame because the group is presumed to have allowed it to happen. This group orientation also is reflected in the value placed upon acquiring knowledge concerning others in the group and expressing concern for one another in every respect.

#### ***Confucianism***

Confucianism built on this system and was the official ideology underlying Chinese society until the Communist Revolution of 1949. Retaining the paternalism and emphasis on kinship ties, Confucianism added a broader commitment to the harmonious operation and welfare of the entire society, a society conceived as inherently hierarchical. This was to be achieved by inculcating two cardinal virtues, "humaneness" (*jen*), and "correct behavior" (*li*), the second entailing that everyone conformed to the principles of behavior appropriate to his or her social role in life. Confucians placed great faith in education. Those who behaved badly because they disagreed with or were unaware of Confucian premises were not threatened or punished except as a last resort. Instead, they were subjected to the transforming power of education and the equally powerful, though indirect, influence of good models of thinking and behaving. Protest, dissent, and criticism were appropriate only when the authorities themselves had inadvertently deviated from the principles of good government. Indeed, those in power were expected to be sensitive to expressions of discontent. But questioning of the system itself was forbidden. A recent conceptualization of

leadership in China reveals the persistence of Confucian values by including the dimension of moral character (Ling, 1989).

### *Chinese Communism*

Chinese Communism, a form of socialist ideology, reflects many aspects of these two social influences. Though the ties of kinship are considerably weakened, the prevailing orientation is still toward the group: one's work unit, the factory, or the state itself. The good Communist is concerned with the welfare of the whole, not with personal loss or gain. The state and all its properties are collectively owned by the people, and everyone strives (at least in theory) to serve the people. At the same time, people take for granted that the state, as represented by the work unit, should provide for their families and look after their well-being by continuing to employ them regardless of their efforts. The doctrines of the party are assumed to be beyond question, and dissent is limited to calls for reform not revolution. The faith in education remains as strong as ever, though it is now labeled "ideological education," that is, education in the principles of socialism. As before, the assumption is that once the truth has been placed before an individual, the scales will fall from his or her eyes. And the use of group pressure and shame to compel conformity lives on in such techniques of social control as the public "self-criticism" sessions.

### *Family and Modern Work Life*

These cultural traditions persist in the modern relationships between family and work life. Many individual benefits and necessities are provided through the workplace. Workers live on plant grounds, and three generations from one family may be employed at the factory, a variation on the traditional description of the fortunate Chinese household as one with "three generations under one roof." The larger the factory, the greater the range of services it will provide: education, housing, meals, medical care, jobs for children of workers, assistance with emergencies, arrangement of marriages, and intervention on the worker's behalf in legal and administrative problems (Walder, 1989). It also has the power to grant or deny workers' requests to have children. These services are either unavailable elsewhere or are scarce and expensive, making the worker very dependent on the factory.

Thus, although people are affiliated with a variety of organizations, the most significant one is each person's work unit. In some ways, managers of the work units function as parents of a big family. Not only are they responsible for succeeding in business, they also become involved in finding solutions to employees' personal problems (Wall, 1990). When an employee has a personal problem that directly affects his or her work performance, it reflects negatively on a work unit that may not have cared enough to assist him or her. This continuity between work and private life is reflected in what constitutes a "good" worker as well: An individual must perform well on the job and be trouble-free in his or her personal life.

### *Factory Directory Responsibility System*

Beginning in 1949, when the Peoples' Republic of China was founded, a tripartite socialist structure governed the workplace. This structure consisted of the Communist Party, busi-

ness management, and the workers' union. From 1949 to 1979, the party was the most influential of the three. Policies and practices emphasized ideological purification at the expense of production. However, the social reform which began in 1979 inspired unprecedented enthusiasm about productivity. A "factory director responsibility system" was instituted in almost all factories. This system officially required factory directors to coordinate the party, business management, and the workers' union. The party is in charge of political ideology and represents management directly, addressing issues such as morale and mobilization of the masses. Business management includes responsibility for such functions as production, technology, sales, and marketing. The union represents the workers' interests directly, gathering their opinions and addressing issues of importance to them. These issues mainly concern the distribution of welfare and housing, but the union may also solicit ideas for improvement in plant management and innovations in technology (Warner, 1991). Thus, for the first time in almost 40 years, management has full responsibility for production in the factories, at least in theory.

While party organizations hold much less formal power than before in the management of the factory (Chamberlain, 1987), the amount of informal influence the party has from one factory to the next is quite variable. The party still has the right to be consulted on or approve appointments that a director makes to his staff, and it may have formal authority to lead the union director's practices to make sure that policies and regulations are being followed and that the workers' opinions are being considered. Managers may also rely on the party to assist them in "educating" workers to hold the proper attitude toward their work (Chamberlain, 1987; Walder, 1989). At a minimum, a factory director strives to maintain a harmonious relationship with the party (Walder, 1989).

### **Procedures and Method**

In order to address our research questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted. We took extensive interview notes and analyzed them for emerging concepts and themes using the principles of the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We used this data collection procedure and analytic method to avoid certain methodological pitfalls. Most generally, we were concerned about whether the questions we asked would be meaningful in another culture. The paucity of research on managerial communication in China made us especially wary of imposing constructs from one culture onto another, and operating on unexamined assumptions about cultural values, interpersonal relationships, and social structures (Limaye & Victor, 1991; Triandis & Albert, 1987). Research on Asians by foreigners is especially liable to the bias Edward Said (1978) has labeled "Orientalism," including the assumption that all Orientals are alike. The use of semistructured interviews controls for this bias by permitting uniqueness as well as similarity among managers to emerge. Semistructured interviews also permit feedback that allows immediate correction of misunderstandings and adjustment of culturally based presuppositions. A respondent's refusal to answer a question, his or her recasting of it, the tone and expression that modify the content of an answer, the unsolicited, surprising comment—all can be used to clarify question answer exchanges.

### *The Managers and Their Factories*

Interviews were conducted with ten high-level manufacturing executives from various areas of the People's Republic of China. These executives were part of a trade delegation headquartered in Columbus, Ohio during January and February, 1990. Cosponsored by the Sino/Ohio Center and the Chinese State Council of Mechanical and Electrical Products, the visit was designed to allow managers to participate in business meetings with central Ohio companies.

Since the entire delegation (with the exception of the Chinese interpreter) was male, all ten managers were male. Their official titles varied. Some managers listed as many as four titles, including manager, factory director, deputy director, vice director, and even one "supreme" deputy director. Most were university graduates with technical backgrounds in areas such as engineering and economics. The managers had held their positions for three to twelve years and were responsible for factories that manufactured a variety of small electronic and machine products. The factories ranged in size from 340 to 3,200 workers. Occasionally, when we asked about organizational size, a manager would give us two figures, one that excluded and one that included the family members of the workers.

### *The Interviewers*

Three individuals planned and conducted each interview. All are professors of communication. One is a native of mainland China and speaks both Chinese and English. Another reads modern and classical Chinese, studies Chinese rhetoric, and lived and studied in Taiwan for one year. The third has expertise in organizational communication and interviewing. Thus our group had a range of familiarity with organizational communication and Chinese culture that proved useful in the questioning process. Each interview was conducted with the assistance of the delegation's official interpreter, an employee of the State Planning Commission of the People's Republic of China.

### *The Interview Process*

The interviewers prepared an interview opening, a general outline of topics and tentative questions related to the structure and operation of the managers' factories and of the communication practices within the factories. Interviews were scheduled from between 7:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. during the week since managers were committed to other meetings throughout the day and on weekends. All interviews took place in the lounge areas of the apartment complex where the delegation resided. After exchanging business cards and introductions, the interpreter presented our prepared opening which included an explanation of our results, an explanation of their right to resist answering particular questions, and an invitation for any questions about the interview or its procedures (Gorden, 1980). Because a semistructured interview approach was used, the length of each interview varied from one to two hours.

Our early interview experience led us to make several revisions. Over time, we were able to identify those questions that elicited nearly identical responses from managers, such as "Describe how your organization is structured." While highly reliable (Kirk & Miller, 1986), these questions yielded little new information; thus we devoted increasingly less time to them. Instead of asking bluntly about disagreements or conflicts at work and how

they are managed, we learned to ask managers to describe what they considered to be one instance of a "problem" employee and then to outline the steps they would take to deal with such an individual. Abstract questions related to organizational stability such as "How much change occurs in your plant?" grew increasingly concrete: for example, "What is your greatest worry?" We appear to have created a relaxed and informal atmosphere. Respondents felt free to laugh at some of our questions and some even joked with us near the end of the interviews, asking us questions like "Why do they [American managers] want all of that money?" and "What do they do with it?" (#9).

### ***Data Analysis***

Once the interviews were completed, interview notes were copied and exchanged. We individually analyzed the set of notes for recurring concepts and themes related to our research questions. In doing so, we looked for similarities and areas of uniqueness within the responses to our questions. When necessary, we discussed our impressions of the data until consensus emerged on the patterns we were seeing in the responses.

## **Results and Discussion**

Because traditional China has been characterized as a heavily bureaucratized society, one of our principal interests was to examine the extent to which a rational-legal model exists in manufacturing organizations. In the following two sections, we discuss managers' responses concerning how their factories conform to and diverge from the bureaucratic ideal.

### ***Bureaucratic Structures and Processes***

Ways in which these factories conformed to the bureaucratic ideal include the use of formal information centers, centralized authority structures, and the establishment and use of performance-reward contingencies.

#### ***Formal Information Centers***

Consistent with a bureaucratic form of organization, two managers explicitly discussed the presence and use of formal "information centers" (#5, #7). As one manager described it, "Information centers are common in state factories, less common in the provinces." (The greater the production capacity, the more important the product to the national economy and the more advanced the technology, the more likely it is to be a state factory.) Technical, production, and personnel information is catalogued and saved including written records of reports presented at meetings, weekly and monthly quality reports, customers' letters concerning the factory's products, and market surveys. "In each production unit, we have people gather this information, sort it and send it to the information center. It's open to everyone, except the personnel files" (#5). Personnel files are less accessible because they contain confidential information on each worker, such as his or her political orientation.

#### ***Centralized Authority***

Centralization of authority was evident in managers' description of how they made decisions and implemented their ideas. One manager stated that he would rather be a manager



than a worker because "I can put my ideas and concepts into practice . . . workers have fewer autonomous rights" (#5). This same manager, when talking about what he does when he has an idea for a change in the factory, indicated that if he wants a large investment, he talks with the director and the other deputy directors about it. When asked if he would include the workers' union, he acknowledged that he might meet with their representatives, but then he said, "If they don't like it, we will still do it" (#5).

When asked to describe a managerial plan he had fulfilled, another manager said "I reorganized . . . simplified the management staff. I had 150 [managers and supervisors]. I sent 25 to the workshops. Management is working better, people in the workshop are working better" (#1). The same manager alluded to the ultimate authority of the deputy directors and the director in problem solving when he said,

Disagreements are very rare. If they happen it is because people are looking at things from different angles. We will discuss and exchange ideas, but in the end, they listen to me [a deputy director], and I listen to the director. Sometimes I'm right and sometimes I'm wrong. If I'm wrong, I change my mind. (#1)

He went on to say that when he is wrong, he publicly criticizes himself, usually in a meeting, in order to improve himself. While public self-criticism following incorrect decision making diverges from a rational-legal model of organization, making important strategic decisions only at the highest levels of authority conforms to such a model.

#### *Performance-Reward Contingencies*

A final way in which these factories seemed to conform to the bureaucratic ideal was in the link that managers tried to establish and maintain between worker performance and rewards (#1, #2, #6, #8). One manager said "Those who work well get more financial rewards than those who don't. If they exceed their quotas and have high quality, they get rewarded" (#8). He went on to say that he gives "spiritual encouragement" first, financial incentives second. "Spiritual encouragement" involves selecting someone as a model worker, putting his or her name and photo in a gallery, and sending him or her red flowers. After this, he gives financial rewards to high performers. He also indicated that he has a 3 to 5 percent "promotion right" under his control. Another manager said "I don't grant job transfer requests because we need the workers where they are. I tell them 'someone has to do it. You agreed to do it. You have been rewarded for it.' [Instead] I try to improve their condition, give them more benefits" (#2). For him, this meant that someone who did dirty, heavy work would be issued more than one bar of soap.

#### *Nonbureaucratic Structures and Processes*

How Chinese factories diverge from a bureaucratic ideal became clear as these managers described their far-ranging duties, discrepancies between their assigned levels of responsibility and authority (primarily with respect to personnel management), and competing sources of authority.

### *Ill-defined Duties*

Throughout the interviews, the managers revealed that the position of "factory director" has no well-defined limits. Indeed, the diversity and burden of their responsibilities was a common complaint among them. As one manager said, "The factory takes care of workers until their death. It provides housing, enforces birth control quotas, and manages quarrels between spouses" (#10). Four managers described how their work is affected by having administrative responsibility for assigning and maintaining workers' housing (#1, #2, #8, #10). They noted that they or their delegates often must hear and manage workers' requests for more space (#1) or complaints about inadequate fuel and utilities in the residential areas (#2, #8). Apparently, a number of factory directors or their delegates oversee a "Dependents Committee" that consists of family members of the workers (#2). Two managers explicitly mentioned their responsibility for enforcing government control policies (#8, #10). If a factory "overproduces," the couple, the factory, and the manager can all be penalized; at the same time, the manager is the ultimate target for workers' requests for a child. As one manager put it,

The factory signs a contract with childbearing women. The district gives the factory a quota for a given period of time. It decides who gets to have children that year. Individuals are punished if they overproduce. The factory is too. They can be disqualified from various competitions. I [the factory director] would be fined. The violators would also be fined—both the man and the woman. The man might not get rewards or be promoted. (#8)

This same manager summarized his varied duties by saying "The factory is like a small city" (#8).

Although these managers complained about their range of responsibilities, they did not describe what other sources have revealed to be one of their most effective strategies for coping with them. As Walder has noted (1989), managers often deal with the day-to-day pressure from workers for favors by diverting resources earmarked for other purposes to employee benefits—bonuses, new housing, better food, or new clothes, a feat often achieved through double-bookkeeping. Since such diversions are known to be illegal, the managers' silence is not surprising. Perhaps seeing himself as the exception to this widespread practice, one manager brought up a case in which he refused to behave in this way despite worker appeals. He did not rescind a medical tax, defending his action on the grounds that the plant needed to balance its books (#3).

### *Responsibility-Authority Discrepancies*

A second way in which the factories diverged from the bureaucratic ideal was the extent to which factory directors' responsibilities for personnel management exceeded their formal authority. In general, managers described situations in which they struggle to meet quotas without having the authority to discipline or fire workers. More specifically, the main reason they felt that "personnel management is the biggest headache" (#8) was the difficulty of firing a worker. The manager who decides to fire a worker has embarked on a complicated, drawn-out affair that involves the workers' union, all the employees, layers

of mediation, and appeals procedures. One director observed that a manager's job is much easier in the United States precisely because of the power to fire (#8). Some managers also alluded to their limited ability to promote workers or reward them financially. In addition, one acknowledged problems in overseeing and evaluation administrators (that is, section chiefs and supervisors) by saying "In China, the workers are rewarded by piece-rate, but administrators are hard to control because it's hard to divide up the responsibilities and account for results with administrators/section chiefs" (#10).

Although the managers did not mention it as a problem, they did note that individuals are commonly appointed to a job, often against their wishes and often for life. This was even true of some of our interviewees. One hapless manager, who said that he was interested in technical matters, not management, had refused the appointment several times, all to no avail, and was still not reconciled to the situation (#9). He expressed his sentiments this way: "I would rather be a director than a floor worker, but being a director isn't easy. It's so troublesome. My interest is in technical matters, not management. I was appointed to the director's job" (#9). Another was more philosophical as he described his situation: "The State has educated me, so I owe it to the State to fill the job" (#6).

#### *Competing Sources of Authority*

Our interviews make clear that the Chinese Communist Party is a potentially competing source of authority in the factories. The managers' attitudes concerning their relationship to the party varied. Some saw the party as providing welcome managerial assistance, others reported that they felt monitored by it, still others were reticent in discussing their views. When the party was valued, it was not so much for its overarching ideological leadership as for its aid in helping managers to implement specific policies within the plant. For instance, one manager said "The party assists the director in managing the factory, by educating the staff, supporting the director . . . Party members might educate workers who are having difficulty implementing the yearly plans by saying 'Don't complain, work harder'" (#4). Other managers seemed to keep the party at more of a distance, perhaps because, as one manager noted, the party has a legal responsibility to turn in a manager if he breaks the law. More specifically, he indicated that "The party secretary will give me warnings if I am violating state laws and regulations. If the warnings go unheeded, the party secretary can report me to the government" (#7). The same manager had formed a coterie of advisors, the "intelligent group," in which the party did not participate. Another manager, when asked how many people were under him, replied dryly that it was hard to say, because he wasn't sure if the party was under him (#6). Another described the party's role as that of "coordinator." When asked "of what?" he simply dismissed the subject by saying, "It's hard to say," a standard Chinese way of politely dropping a subject (#9). Finally, some managers did not even mention the party unless asked directly about it. The variation in managers' relationships with the party, as well as some managers' attempts to keep it at a distance or even shut it out entirely, no doubt reflect fundamental tension created by the socialist structure. It appears to be an ongoing and irresolvable problem.

A similar range existed in the managers' interpretations of Chinese Communist shibboleths. One defined "socialism" as follows: "Business organizations follow a socialist ideology; they exist to build up the economy in China" (#2). Another said, "You should get

[according to] what you have done; the more you do, the more you'll get. . . . Workers will be better off only if the factory is developing well. [You] can judge a factory by how well the workers are doing in benefits" (#4). Another put a similarly capitalist twist on the notion of "ideological education": "you tell them to work better so they'll get more money" (#1). This range of interpretations of party-sanctioned terms whose connotations and uses often shift abruptly even in official discourse, may in part be creative misinterpretations to sanction an approach the individual manager prefers to adopt without having to fight a frontal battle against the party line. The variation in how managers relate to the party and interpret party-sanctioned terms are rational responses to what are arguably irrational structures and processes.

The overlapping functions between the party and management create ambiguous lines of authority. Both represent management to the workers and try to maintain high morale. Both are involved in setting policy, and both are responsible for the results. To complicate matters further, the relationship between the party and management can vary according to political shifts and the personalities of particular factory and party officials. Because the party represents the current line of accepted thought, it can demand that factory procedure be adjusted to follow the many changes in the political winds, rather than being responsive to economic factors. For instance, after the Tiananmen Square tragedy, the party attempted to assert its authority, stating that "only if the party members in enterprises [such as factories] give full play to their role as the 'fighting bastion' and party members play an exemplary role can the party's line, principles and policies be thoroughly carried out" (FBIS Daily Report, 12/29/89, pp. 4–6).

To recapitulate, these interviews offer insights on the extent to which the structure and procedures of these factories correspond to and diverge from Weber's notion of rational bureaucracy. On the one hand, the managers referred to conforming elements such as the use of formal information centers, centralized decision making, and performance reward contingencies. However, in a number of key respects, these managers revealed how their factories diverge from Weber's bureaucratic ideal. Managers must meet quotas under conditions of extremely limited power so that they struggle to fulfill their job duties. As a rule, their extremely limited ability to reward or punish, to hire or fire constrains their attempts to ensure efficient worker performance. Assigning individuals to jobs (often for life) for which they have little or no training or interest compounds the problem and runs contrary to the careerization that marks bureaucracy as an ideal type. The paternalism under which managers control and are responsible for almost every aspect of workers' lives means that, in reality, their jobs have no well-defined limits, and that they relate much more personally with workers than a bureaucratic model would prescribe. Last, the overlapping functions between the party and management sometimes confuses lines of authority. Thus, we conclude along with others (S. G. Redding, 1990; Walder, 1986; Yang, 1959) that a special form of bureaucracy seems to operate in Chinese factories.

### *Managerial Communication Practices*

In this section we discuss managers' descriptions of general upward and downward communication practices in their factories, how they persuade and motivate workers and manage employee conflicts. We will concentrate on the extent to which these practices reflect

the larger culture, and note how they conform to and diverge from those prescribed by the bureaucratic ideal.

### *Vertical Communication*

In general, these managers acknowledged that communication and interpersonal relationships were very important to them in their jobs. Even if employees do not wish to communicate their feelings and desires, they must be "encouraged" to do so; managers, in turn, must be "thick-skinned" and persistent in their communication attempts even when others may not want to talk with them (#10). Another manager emphasized the importance of listening to effective communication when he said "if communication is stuck, it means you've lost your ears" (#9). This same manager remarked that communication is important not only in the work but also in the very subtle process of creating personal relationships with people.

These managers described the use of several formal means of upward and downward communication in their factories. In order to provide opportunities for *upward communication*, some managers made themselves quite available during working hours. One made himself too available perhaps, allowing himself to be hounded by employees seeking favors to the point that they burst into his office at any time, followed him home, cursing him all the way, and even intruded on his dinner (#10). More consistent with the bureaucratic ideal, however, many managers created formal avenues for upward communication. These managers insisted on clear lines of communication; delegated authority, often to committees; and restricted access, holding open hours only at specified times. One indicated that he gets opinions of the people from the workers' union, remarking that in this way the people "go through 'ladders' up to me" (#2). This same manager indicated that he also sets aside a half day each week when the people can come to him to voice their problems directly. Other managers revealed their reliance on a chain of command in managing workers' problems. One said that "any visit or talk is welcome, but I can't solve all problems, so I send them to the appropriate department" (#6). Another manager said that for women who will not accept that they cannot have a child, "First they would have to speak to an official in the birth control office. Usually, I won't get involved in it" (#8). Two managers referred to use of factory or union committees to screen workers' suggestions for improvements (#3, #6). One of these said, "Under the union there is a committee that hears ideas on management. The committee discusses it. If the idea is reasonable, they put the suggestion in writing to me, asking for permission to change" (#3). Another manager uses a "Director's Letter Box," where "workers can write letters to complain or propose improvements in the factory. Some use this to complain about personal problems with housing, or children's arrangements or to tell on someone who is not doing their job" (#8). This manager opens the box weekly and receives an average of 1 to 2 letters each week.

Managers also discussed using a range of formal methods for *communication downward* with employees. Almost all managers hold regularly scheduled and unscheduled meetings with various groups of employees (#1, #2, #3, #6, #8, #9, #10). Some managers restricted themselves to formal periodic reports to workers' committees or assemblies while others supplemented these formal practices with informal visits within the plant. At one extreme, however, is a manager who seemed extraordinarily sensitive to the need for managerial

communication. This manager made himself very visible in the plant. He videotaped his speeches to workers and scheduled them before showings of popular films at the plant, took daily walks through the factory, greeted workers at the factory gate in the morning, and spoke with the deputy directory of production every day (#7). This same manager also alluded to the use of "ladders" to communicate downward in his factory when he said "I use the workers' union to tell the people of my plans because there are too many people to communicate with directly."

Three managers drew some distinction between formal and informal downward communication. These managers mentioned that formal warnings were issued to workers who had made serious mistakes or who had ongoing records of poor performance, while less serious offenses were handled through the use of informal conversations (#2, #4, #5). While most managers focused their comments on formal upward and downward communication, one manager explicitly described the presence and uniqueness of informal communication in the factory when he said "Good things stay behind closed doors; bad things travel thousands of miles" (#3). According to this manager, "bad things" included gossip about others' sexual and personal habits, theft, or "poor moral fiber."

#### *Persuading and Motivating Workers*

Managers described themselves as relying heavily on persuasion when seeking adherence to policies (#2, #4, #5, #6). Several managers reported explaining new policies and decisions to workers in detail. Assuming the correctness of his position, one manager explained that "it may happen that my decision isn't popular. This is because I didn't explain it enough, so I will wait so they can understand it and will explain it more" (#6). Most said they strive for consensus, though they will proceed without it if they feel workers will eventually see the value of the changes. Several managers described the party and the workers' union as playing a significant part in this persuasive process. Once a policy has been agreed upon, party and union members interpret and defend it to the workers, and relay worker concerns back to management (#2, #4, #5, #6). Specifically, one manager said:

If we want to carry out new rules, we'll ask them [the workers' union] for help in explaining it to workers. These rules are good for workers. For example, "no smoking" in the workshop . . . yes, the workers are sometimes unhappy so we have to explain it. We could be fined up to 40 *yuan* [principal Chinese unit of currency] for violations. I will get a higher fine—120 *yuan*. (#5)

He added that if the factory inspectors don't report violations, the workers can report both the inspector and the factory director.

The managers reported using both direct and indirect strategies to motivate workers. One manager tried to get the best from his workers by "working from their strengths" and conveying the message that he is responsible for their failures, while the workers are responsible for their successes (#9). He added that "even a poor worker has strong points." Another manager said that he tells workers to "Try to relate their important personal interests and concerns with their work attitudes and performance" (#6). Most managers, however, used more direct techniques that often involved promising a range of material

and "spiritual" rewards. One manager said that he simply tells workers "to work harder, and get training, to get a better bonus" (#1). Another manager created "Competition Campaigns." He explained that those who did poorly would suffer loss of self-esteem in front of their fellow workers, and their parents would grill them on why they were not doing well in the competition (#6). Other managers appealed to the workers' sense of duty to the factory and the society by saying things like "Work harder. The people/factory will never forget what you have done" (#8). Another manager, who was part of an experiment on factory management, said that he motivates workers through the use of a wage distribution system and with the help of the union. The union representatives communicate with the workers and "get them to accept my plan so they'll do the work willingly" (#7). As was mentioned in our discussion of performance reward contingencies, four managers discussed using strategies such as awarding outstanding workers with certificates, flowers, and other marks of distinction (such as a nominal bonus), as well as singling them out by name for praise during speeches (#1, #2, #6, #8). Most typically, "spiritual" encouragement and inspiration are given more frequently and freely than are material rewards.

#### *Managing Conflicts with Workers*

Conflict resolution is another area in which communication played an important role. When asked to give examples of "problem" workers and to describe the steps that they would take in dealing with such workers, many managers described complaining workers. Most managers said that when workers complain they try to find out if the complaints are valid. "Maybe they're having a job problem or a personal problem" (#5, #6). One of these managers went on to say "We have to find out the cause behind it [the bad attitude]. If he intentionally caused trouble, he will be punished according to the regulations. I won't directly involve myself. Managers under me will deal with it" (#5). Complaining in and of itself, however, was not always seen as requiring intervention. One manager, when pushed on this point, stated that an unhappy worker would be permitted to continue venting his grievances as long as he did not act on them (#2). As other managers quite reasonably observed, "complaints aren't always bad" (#5, #6). The relatively high tolerance for worker complaints that some of these managers expressed differs from the accounts of Walder's interviewees, who described a terrorized and demoralized work force afraid to utter the smallest protest (Walder, 1986). The difference may reflect the greater liberalization of the post-Cultural Revolution atmosphere. If managers are not able to make the improvements that workers demand, allowing them to blow off steam may be an adaptive response.

Beyond handling complaining workers, managers described conflicts over coming late to work, failing to meet production deadlines, stealing from the enterprise, and such (from the Chinese view) disruptive, selfish, and antisocial activities as quarreling with family members or gambling (#2, #4, #5). Similar to the management of complaining workers, the first step in resolving these conflicts was to determine why the behavior was going on (#5, #6). If there was no good reason, the next step would be "ideological education." Since China is a socialist country and all workers are, by working for the factory, also working for the country, apathetic performance or antisocial behaviors can only be because the individual does not understand his or her duties. As one manager put it, because the factory makes welfare better for the workers, "Workers should be loyal to the factory. Their minds

and hearts should be on their work" (#2). Another said: "Quality problems are mainly due to the workers' lack of responsibility, so everyone will educate the workers" (#5). Another said that he tries to inspire in workers the spirit of a true "owner of the nation" [and therefore, the factory], suggesting that they should be behaving in a more responsible and dignified fashion (#8). The party and union members all may get involved "to raise a worker's consciousness" (#5) concerning his or her poor performance. In theory, as soon as the individual is reminded of his or her responsibilities, his or her attitude should improve and the problem should disappear (#5, #6, #8).

As was suggested earlier, "ideological education" or simply, "education" turned out to be a mixture of cajoling, threats, and promise of reward. One manager translated "giving education" into "tell them to work better so they will get more money" (#1). Another explained the process this way: "You find out why he's doing it and explain why he can't do it that way" (#4). As one manager put it, if the worker's direct supervisor was unable to induce the worker to correct his errors, he himself would: (a) criticize the worker, (b) encourage him by pointing out that "if you change this behavior, you'll be a good worker, and if you do in time, you won't be docked," and if this fails, (c) threaten him with firing (#3).

Should this not work, the problem worker's coworkers, friends, and family are often enlisted to intensify the "education." One manager, for instance, said he would "send the workers union to ask the family to help change him," and ask them to discuss with the worker the "error of his ways" (#4). Three managers said they would ask friends to talk to the problem worker (#4, #6, #9). When asked what these friends might say, one manager replied that they would have "heart-to-heart" talks in which the friend would help the worker see "the consequences of his actions and that it's not honorable to create family problems" (#4). They will "exchange views" and "the friends will correct his bad views" (#4). Four managers mentioned using a similar process to settle workers' marital quarrels (#4, #5, #9, #10). Threats, penalties, and other coercive measures were always considered an unhappy last resort.

However, for a few managers ideological education seemed to be an empty gesture, or even a process they no longer used. Several did not mention it at all when describing steps taken to deal with problem workers. And when we asked one of these managers about it directly, he replied, "of course, ideological education comes first," but he was not interested in discussing it any further.

To sum up, many significant aspects of managerial communication in these factories can be attributed to the distinctive operating style of Chinese socialist bureaucracy and to the larger societal or cultural context. The paternalistic role assumed by managers means that they must walk a fine line in communication with workers. On the one hand, they need reliable information about workers' welfare, lest deteriorating conditions lead to worker slowdown, absenteeism, and shoddy performance. On the other hand, they must ensure that they are not deluged by the requests of desperate workers, spouses, and relatives. The attempts by managers to construct official channels of communication for worker requests and complaints is characteristic of rational bureaucracies. However, given the breadth and seriousness of worker needs, such structural solutions can never be adequate and managers systems further from the bureaucratic ideal. As one manager put it "I



tell the workers 'Don't come in during office hours. I have to take care of production.' I direct them to deputies, but they insist on seeing me saying 'You'll make the decision'" (#10).

According to socialist theory, managers must take workers' opinions into account and build on workers' support. In practice managers need worker assent to new policies as well as ongoing cooperation with existing ones because managers have few other means to ensure worker cooperation. Under such conditions their great interest in maintaining open communication channels with workers and in persuading them to comply is quite natural, as is the common practice of enlisting the party and the union to assist with such persuasive campaigns. This is, however, unilateral persuasion from a position of superiority and certainty rather than a dialogue, a stance which is consistent with the models of persuasion-as-teaching in both Confucianism and Chinese socialism.

These restrictions on managers also result in motivation strategies that boil down to praise and symbolic tokens of distinction. Even though managers may personally doubt the effectiveness of "ideological education" to correct poor performance and other worker shortcomings, its practice is closely tied to socialist ideology and the Chinese cultural context, as well as reflecting again the restrictions on managers' power of managing employees. It has deep roots in a culture that has great optimism about the individual's ability to improve and in education's capability to bring this about. The automatic inclusion of kin and friends in this process, the group pressure, and the appeals to honor and shame are all rooted in traditional Chinese methods of conflict resolution. They are, of course, the opposite of the impersonal, legalist procedures that typify a rational bureaucracy.

### **Conclusions and Future Directions**

Our findings reveal how factory directors in China rely on oral communication to exchange information, motivate and confront problem workers. They differ somewhat from those of Hildebrandt (1988) whose survey results showed that PRC managers use much more written communication than oral, and that they do not see communication and persuasion as areas of concern. The differences most likely reflect the types of research questions addressed. Hildebrandt was concerned with communication between managers and the many levels of bureaucracy above them, extending all the way to the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Managers and workers alike may normally have little leeway for arguing with directives sent down through the official channels, and they may prudently choose evasion, creative misunderstanding, or simple noncompliance with policies they find distasteful. However, at the factory level the manager does have some latitude in implementing policy and also can be pressured into change. For example, he can requisition extra soap for those doing especially dirty work—and the workers can respond accordingly and wrangle with him for favors to which they feel entitled.

Since so little research exists on internal, managerial communication in China, we believe that the present results, though preliminary are quite promising. This research has allowed us to uncover a distinctive web of managerial communication practices which can be traced to the cultural context, political ideology, and organizational structure of state-owned Chinese factories in the early 1990s. Through our use of semistructured interviews we were able to create a relaxed, informal atmosphere. Both the interpreter and the native

Chinese interviewer expressed surprise at how candid the managers were in many of their responses. The managers may have felt much freer to express their real views away from lifelong co-workers, and out of earshot of the Party. Also, managers who experienced the Cultural Revolution of the late '60s and early '70s may be less worried now about being held to their views at a later date or criticized for them.

Even though our results are preliminary, closely tied to context and to our particular sample of managers, they do suggest some possible lines of further investigation. That these managers seek reasons underlying misbehavior and enlist the assistance of co-workers and family members when confronting problem workers warrants further investigation. U.S. research on interpersonal influence in organizations traditionally has focused on patterns of dyadic influence and largely ignored the possibility that influence attempts span organizational and family boundaries and may include the use of intermediaries. Currently, we are examining Chinese managers' written reports of what they say and do when confronting a problem worker. Studying persuasive strategies among Chinese managers will permit comparisons with existing research on strategy use among other eastern and western managers (Hirokawa & Miyahara, 1986) and perhaps lead to more culturally sensitive explanations of strategic communication behavior in organizations (Limaye & Victor, 1991).

Second, in an attempt to better understand the social climate and culture of Chinese factories we are examining the kinds of positive and negative emotional events that managers experience and their communicative responses in these situations. Describing the types of events that cause pleasant and unpleasant feelings can reveal systems of rights and obligations as they function in these factories (Harre, 1986). By examining what managers say and avoid saying in these situations, we will better understand the social and personal consequences of conforming to or violating behavioral "rules" in the factories. Once made explicit, this knowledge can be compared to the emotional experience of managers from other cultures to better understand that which is universally true about management communication and that which is unique to a particular national culture (Limaye & Victor, 1991).

A third area of research that these interviews suggest is the nature and meaning of formal and informal communication networks in Chinese organizations. To distinguish among and compare these types of communication networks in U.S. organizations is relatively straightforward. However, given at least some pressure to express ideologically correct positions in China, and the fact that other workers and party members can turn one in for failing to express the correct point of view, the differences in formal and informal communication networks may be few, but this remains to be determined. As was mentioned previously, the close interdependence and continuity between work and personal life raises interesting questions related to overlapping social influence and conflict processes in China.

Besides being an interesting subject in its own right, increased knowledge about managerial communication in China also can help reveal some of the cultural assumptions underlying communication practices in U.S. business organizations. The inevitable gap between ideals and practice aside, we found the Chinese custom of associating "moral character" with effective organizational behavior and leadership intriguing since some

have suggested that modern U.S. organizations suffer from inattention to matters of ethical conduct (e.g., W. C. Redding, 1990). Also, we were struck by the Chinese managerial practice of attending to the entire person of the worker. While such "total inclusion" is, of course, a strategy with both opportunities and threats, it contrasts sharply with the assumption of "partial inclusion" so common in U.S. organizations. That organizations could be moral and caring places in which to live and work is an ideal worth pursuing.

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